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CASTRO WANTS a prisoner deal despite the snag in negotiations.

That's the Washington conviction. The snags grow partly out of pressure on Castro from hard-line Reds in Cuba; some demand execution of the prisoners. But Castro scents a chance to relieve Cuba's economy, improve his image abroad. His willingness springs from practical needs, not from any softening toward the U.S. or any pullback from Russia.

Cuba badly needs the food-and-medicine ransom. Castro sights the end of an economic burden through release of the prisoners. He hopes to look like a generous fellow. Resulting propaganda gains could hinder the hemisphere effort to isolate Cuba. But Castro can't win any real rapprochement with the U.S. He won't meet our terms: Cutting ties to Russia, halting subversion abroad.

There's no doubt Washington takes part in the prison deal. U.S. motives: To ease Kennedy's conscience, assuage anti-Castro rebels' bitterness about the invasion fiasco.